Mainstream understandings of how policy making occurs in a democracy arose out of the dominant intellectual traditions of the social sciences. In the first half of the twentieth century general academic perspectives such as structural functionalist sociology and general systems theory were applied to educational problems. Functional explanations of education were strongly influenced by the ideas of writers like Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who argued that education systems exist for the purpose of socialisation, that is to nurture and develop in individuals those abilities and capacities necessary for the maintenance of society, and the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons whose work represents an attempt to combine both ‘holistic’ and ‘individualistic’ theories of social action inspired by Durkheim and Weber respectively.

The functionalist paradigm entailed a liberal conception of the educational process as that of the ‘black box’ (Apple, 1979). Early definitions of policy process highlighted the procedural and implementational aspects of understanding policy in Dye’s (1978: 3) words, as "whatever governments choose to do or not to do". Policy in this sense was implicitly seen as a form of system support. An overview of definitions offered by early theorists, however, led Prunty (1984: 4) to conclude that the "term policy has no standard usage, and it is riddled with ambiguity".

Policy analysis can also be framed with reference to perspectives of power. Pluralism was one such perspective, and dominated the functionalist era of policy analysis. It
has emerged as a response to the modernisation of western societies, so that is provides both a way of interpreting the social and political workings of such societies as well as legitimating them. It represented the policy-making process in terms of two basic assumptions. First, all power was deemed to be legitimate. Second, the state was perceived as a non-problematic, neutral arbiter, whose function was to distribute social and material goods to competing groups.

In contrast to traditional pluralist or functionalist analyses, the last thirty years has seen the emergence of what is now referred to as a critical policy analysis. While much of the early work in this tradition took its impetus from radical versions of sociology, in the last decade a growing number have utilised the works of the French post-structuralist writer Michel Foucault. My own work in policy analysis, as well as my recent book with John Codd and Anne Marie O’Neill (Olssen, et al., 2004, Sage) presents the outlines of a Foucauldian to the analysis of educational policy and the politics of education. Although there are some aspects of Foucault’s work that are not accepted. – his neutralism over ends and values - there is within Foucault’s work the basis for a broad commitment to a democratic and ethical vision of a new welfare community. Rather than employ him in a one-sided negative way that can be found in some readings of his work, Education Policy seeks to utilise Foucault as an ally, sometimes going beyond the literal canon of his texts, but keeping within his general conception of critique in order to re-articulate and re-theorise a new understanding of a social-democratic polity.

Foucault’s methodological insights contribute to a critical policy analysis and are thus compatible with the contributions of writers like Ball (1990, 1993), Dale (1999),
Utilising Foucault in this way, policy sociology is represented as a form of critical policy analysis with no particular affinity or attachment to the discipline of sociology. Because Foucauldianism is not located within any existing discipline, it is more genuinely able to be multi-disciplinary, thus also overcoming Troyna’s (1994) objection to its ability to be multidisciplinary on the grounds of it being located within ‘Sociology’. At the same time, the authors of Education Policy would claim to avoid the problem of theoretical eclecticism, as advocated by Ball (1993) as part of the ‘toolbox’ approach to policy, in that we claim that underpinning Foucault’s approach is a coherent philosophical position. In such a view, the Foucauldian perspective permits the incorporation of a form of ‘critical policy analysis’ within a more grounded and theoretically worked-out critical social science approach. It is not a totalising conception of critique, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, or Marxism, or a reconstructive conception, in the tradition of Habermas. Rather it is a form of critique which sees the possibilities of a purely rational dialogue as always mixed with heteronomous considerations of power and interest, and always supported by the imperatives of survival and well-being. Nevertheless, on this basis, and within such limitations, it struggles against oppressive social structures.


